

Into The Fire

by Ziggurat Rolsovitch

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Summary: This is the story of the mysterious Saito Hajime; the story of how love saved a man from a path of self destruction.

Discontinued

1. Chapter 1

Title: Aku Boku Tou Sen

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A/N Here is my first Hakuouki fiction, I recently got into this series and it quite literally saved me from a dark place to see such epic characters. I think the live action musical was one of the coolest things I have ever seen in my entire life. I was debating who to ship... and it's terrible... on one hand I love Chizuru with Hijikata, that poor loveable guy that really needs some love, but I also love her with Kazama since he's an oni and they need to make oni babies together! ... Oh this puts such a dilemma on my part... then... there's Saito. Cute adorably lonely little Saito who had a really tough life as well. So... *SPOILERS!* Hijikata and Kazama then killed one another. :I that was so totally uncalled for. They had no reason to kill each other, but no they had to be whiney and killed each other and I was like... THAT IS IT! Saito gets her! Since he's one of the few that survived. Now... this fanfic is obviously fiction, but I tried to get it slightly historically accurate. If you know anything about Saito you will definitely laugh at my little plot twists to history. Learning all about his history was so hard since he was so mysterious of a person. A lot of things sound really fishy about it as well and then when you know you feel bad for him and kind of understand exactly why the poor guy drank himself to death. And there is another person that appears, since there are rumors that he did indeed live and nobody is sure or not so I decided... it's

fiction so why not?! Anyways, sorry for this incredibly long author's note, but I want to explain a little before getting into it without giving too much of Saito's history away since this story follows his life after the Shinsengumi. Please enjoy the story. ^^

* * *

><p>"Daddyâ€|? Will you tell me a bedtime story?" The sweet voice came from an innocent and sweet little boy, snuggling into his covers with the covers over his mouth to hide his little smile as he looked at his father with adoration.<p>

"A bedtime storyâ€|? I suppose." He nodded in thought and then sat at the edge of the bed near the boy and took a breath. "Once upon a timeâ€| there was a commander of a great fighting force unlike the world had ever seen... and a princessâ€| the princess was on her way with her escorts to do a few important diplomatic things when she noticed the commander training. She took notice that he had a magnificent sword; which was an 11th generation Kanesada, a very impressive blade. Unsheathing it revealed the blade's delicate curvature... the metal itself looked so pure, almost consecrated. And there it was, a prominent wave-hamon, flowing along the other edge of the sword. to-

A soft slap followed those words. "Hajime, tell him a real story! Don't go on about weapons."

A deep sigh left the man in response. "They started out with not much, but they were truly a spirited group of men-

"Add a dragonâ€|"

"Chizuruâ€|"

"Please?"

"â€|" Another sigh. "Fine."

"What are you two doing?!" The door pushed open to reveal a man in a typical pose to show off a bulk of muscle that he took much pride in.

"Uncle Shinpachi!" The young boy said in excitement when he saw the man.

"There's my little nephewâ€| let ME tell you a story to end all other stories." He walked in, much to Saito's chagrin and plopped down into the rocking chair near the bed. "It was a cold and icy moonlit nightâ€|"

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2. Chapter 2

There was a small exhale. A breath that immediately fogged and release into the cold night's air to disappear somewhere into the darkness. The streets were so empty. Why had it turned out this way? Currently, Chizuru had ended up completely alone. Everyone she had knownâ€| they were gone now and it wasâ€| lonelyâ€| She sighed again

into the cold and rubbed at her arms. She had been wandering aimlessly for quite some time this snowy night. It was so strangely quiet, but then again with those people gone, what else did one expect? It was so sadâ€¦ such amazing and wonderfully beautiful people gone from this world too soon.

Her footsteps left behind the only trail on this deserted road into town. Since it was night and it was so very cold out no wonder everyone was indoors trying to sleep off the chill. Really â€¦ it was so strange with no group of laughing Shinsengumi beside her. Even though she knew it was dissimilar now even before she had come here she just couldn't stop thinking about how very different it had become. She heaved yet another sigh; perhaps as if relieving some sort of internal pressure that built up over her current line of thought.

Upon actually entering the town she found there were a few people out, very few, but it brought her comfort, due to the fact that recentlyâ€¦ she had been having this dream of waking up and being the last person that existed in the world. Doomed to wander alone for the rest of her days and-Slam! She turned the corner and ran right into somebody!

"Ah! Gomen nasaiâ€¦" However when she looked up to see whom she was apologizing to, her heart skipped a little. "S-S-Shinpachi-san!"

"Eh? Chizuru-chan?!" He gasped loudly, a breath immediately turning to fog and rolling slowly upwards just as quickly as his smile. "Hahaha! What are you doing all the way out here in Echigo Province? Is it perhaps because you know the Takada domain is nearby and you want to attempt something crazy?"

"Iâ€¦ was actually going to Tokyo but I ended up getting sidetracked," she wouldn't admit she got lost and really didn't know she was where she was. "and ended up hereâ€¦ theâ€¦ Takada domainâ€¦ maybe I was guided here for some reason thenâ€¦"

"I never thought I'd actually meet up with you again. It's really great to see youâ€¦ heyâ€¦ is anyone else with you?" He asked, but the grave look that she held made the samurai's stomach sink and do a flip that made him feel sick. "Ohâ€¦ ohâ€¦ I seeâ€¦ none of them made it?"

She shook her head. "I don't think soâ€¦"

"Ah! Say you don't have anywhere to stay for the night do you?" Shinpachi asked with a tone that showed clearly he wanted to change the subject; which was fineâ€¦ since she also wanted to change it and not think of their loss.

"No. I don't actuallyâ€¦" Chizuru admitted and he nodded before flexing an arm in pointing to the direction of his current dwelling place. Still a show offâ€¦

"Well why don't you stay the night with me? There's plenty of room." Shinpachi did his best to smile, but she could tell that the news she had brought along had dampened his mood and he was trying to put on a front.

"But I wouldn't want to impose on youâ€|"

"Tsk. There's no need to go and say something like that. It will be perfectly fine. We can catch up on old times. In fact there's a really nice dango shop around here. It's not too late, they should still be open. Do you want to go with me?"

There was a long moment of hesitation before she finally smiled back and nodded. "Alrightâ€|"

"In a few days I'm also headed to there to meet someoneâ€| so we should travel there together don't you think?"

"Really?"

* * *

><p>Just outside the town a group had stopped to camp, guards with prisoners that were still traveling and making their way further down to some degree. For tonight they would be forced to stop here and rest for the time being. In passing a prisoner patted a horse and fed it something with a whisper. "Eat wellâ€|" before he was grabbed by the shoulder and forced towards the tree with the rest of the prisoners. Two guards sat the prisoners around a tree and made sure to keep their guns on the unruly and questionable bunch as the others began to set up a few tents for the night.<p>

"Hey, I need some help over here!" A man yelled as a horse stirred and bucked wildly, breaking itself and a few others free. Now with the guards being distracted a few of the prisoners glanced at one another and gave a brief nod.

"Now!" The leader of the bunch hissed at them quietly and one quickly sliced through his ropes before freeing his friends. For a moment it seemed like a clean break before a gunshot ricochet off the tree's bark. "Go!"

"The prisoners are escaping!"

"Shinsengumi banzai!" A prisoner screamed and pulled a flag hidden away from his kimono as they grabbed the nearest horses to them and bolted, not all of them making it past the hail of gunfire, but most escaping relatively unscathed.

The small group rode quickly through the town. It seemed that they were actually going to make it. They would escape. Freedom slipped by them right before their eyes when the city town guard blocked their path with raised spears. The horses couldn't make it through that and they needed the horses to have the advantage. The group quickly turned their horses and attempted another street. It was blocked too; guards were closing in on their position quickly. They were like cornered wolves.

Not soon after once they turned their horses in attempts to take another way they saw the line that had formed behind them, the rifles were aimed directly at them.

"Fire!"

The escaped prisoners dropped, slumped over their horses, fell

injured or died on the spot from an unlucky shot that managed to hit the head. It was over. Their final attempt at freedom had failed and now they were going to die. So much planningâ€¦ all for nothing. But these prisonersâ€¦ former Shinsengumi would not go down in such a manner. They would go down fighting.

"Taichou!" A wounded prisoner grabbed a sword that'd been strapped to the horse's saddle and tossed it to him.

The captain caught the sword and glanced towards the guard with the intensity of fire burning in his eyes, so much so the men actually flinched in fear as if he had physically struck them. What remained of his men, stood beside him, all prepared to fight to the very death.

"Put your weapon down." The commander of the guard ordered. "You have nowhere to run."

However this captain only smiled in return and refused to do such a thing, insteadâ€¦ despite not having a gun he aimed the end of his sword towards the commander as if it were such a weapon that could reach him. Clearly the commander wasn't amused; rather it had pissed him off to see such defiance. He raised a hand and the line of riflemen opened fire filling the streets with smoke and blood.

* * *

><p>"Whatâ€¦ was that?" Shinpachi threw his covers off and quickly grabbed a kimono to throw on before he quickly headed downstairs and opened the door to find out what the hell was going on. Upon stepping out he was met with a crowd in the streets.<p>

"Shinpachi-san?" Chizuru had also been awoken it seemed as she came from the guest room and walked towards him. "What's happening?"

"I'm not sureâ€¦" He stepped outside and pushed past a couple of people for a better view when he saw it. His eyes fell upon one man; one single man that reached out a hand towards the red flag that had been trampled into the ground, then turning to fight off the guards trying to take him. "No wayâ€¦"

Hearing those words Chizuru quickly moved to his side and once she saw that person, looking so strong and yet so weak at the same time she wanted to run to him, but Shinpachi grabbed her arm to stop her, knowing full well these men were honorless and would shoot her dead. Shinpachi clenched his fists after letting her go once she understood. There was no way that he could let this go on like this, his blood was boiling. He glanced to his right and noticed the guard nearbyâ€¦ and the powder cart near the group of soldiers. He slammed into the guard in a running tackle and grabbed his gunâ€¦ held it up towards the barrels and pulled the triggerâ€¦

It was only by luck the barrel was hit and the streets were so full of smoke it seemed impossible to see; only fits of coughing could identify anything. Shinpachi quickly marched his way towards them the best he could see and slammed the rifle into the man that was close enough to see and try to stop him. He looked around before spotting the left handed swordsman and once he was close enough for his old companion to have recognized him he slammed his back into his so that they could cover every direction.

"Saito."

"Nagakura." He acknowledged calmly, though sounding slightly winded.

"You looked like you could use some help." Shinpachi commented, even if he had promised himself he was done with fighting he couldn't leave an old comrade behind to battle all alone.

"Hm."

"This is war isn't it?"

"It would seem so." Saito replied glancing to his left as a guard attempted to charge them, with one clean slice he put the man down and Shinpachi dropped a man on his side as well. Now that the guards had gathered their wits after that explosion they were moving in on them. "I apologize for dragging you into thisâ€¦ I had no intentions of such a thing."

"Heh, you didn't, I can make choices for myself Saito-san." He gave a half smile and ducked under the slice of a sword before head-butting the guard before him and stunning the man.

"Ichinose Denpachi! Surrender now!" The commander drew his sword, and Saito turned smoothly and drew his sword. There was a sudden sound, a tearing sound and then the heavy thud of a sword landing upon the groundâ€¦ with a hand still attached. A long silence followed, before the commander screamed and guards rushed to his aid, forgetting about the two ex-Shinsengumi and allowing them to make a break for it. There was no way they could take on so many all alone, they were smarter than that.

"Chizuru! Come here! Quickly!" He searched for her through the fog and at the hint of pink he knew without a doubt it was her and grabbed her by the kimono and dragged her along with them. "Saito, take her to the docks, it's just straight that way over there. I'll meet you there in a little while. I have something to do first."

"Hai." Saito took her other arm and led her in another direction as Shinpachi let go of her, but she hesitated and tried to pull away from his grasp, forcing him to stop and pull her into a dark corner along with him so they wouldn't be spotted idling. "Yukimuraâ€¦?"

"I had thought that you wereâ€¦" She let the words trail slowly and he gave a strange look.

"I promised." The only sound in this small space after those words was his breathing. It was most definitely uncomfortably small and he was far too close for comfort. "Hijikata-sanâ€¦?" Saito said softly in question and she looked down. Unfortunately she had no answer for him. "I seeâ€¦ is it finishedâ€¦?"

"As the lastâ€¦ you can't give up Saito-sanâ€¦" She glanced over as some guards ran by quickly in search of them and hoped Shinpachi was alright. Once she turned her attention back to Saito she jumped slightly in how startled she was, both at his appearance and the look that he gave her. "S-Saito-san?" Instead of saying anything he looked

away and she wondered just what he was thinking now since he had such a look directed at her. Almostâ€¦ wellâ€¦ was there a word for that look? If there was she didn't know it.

"Did I give such an indication that I was willing to give up? In Hijikata's placeâ€¦ I will definitely protect you, Yukimura."

"You don't need to-" She paused in her sentence when she attempted to set her hand against his chest and push him away upon feeling the warm, wet fabric near his shoulder. "Saito-sanâ€¦ you're bleeding."

"You needn't be concerned. It's a flesh wound." He backed up to some degree so she could step out and then they continued their journey towards the docks as discreetly as they possibly could. It was tense and full of fear, at least for her, as they snuck down the moonlit streets and alleyways all while trying to evade the guards searching for him. Saito let out an exasperated sigh as they came to a stop in an alleyway and he looked around the corner. "It would have been helpful, had Nagakura-san told us just what we were doing here or at the very least the name of the boat."

"Ahâ€¦" Chizuru looked around the corner at the dock and all the boats that were there for the night. "Is it possible he doesn't intend for us to take a boat?"

"If not I can't say for certain why he would suggest this way, unless he intends for us to freeze to death in the waters by trying to swim away." Saito replied, tone not at all amused, though if anything she actually thought he sounded angry and upset to some degreeâ€¦ but not towards Shinpachiâ€¦ was it possibleâ€¦ he felt guilty for surviving when his men didn't?

"We're taking mine! Named after meâ€¦" Shinpachi's voice came from behind them as he approached them, obviously having caught up with them a little earlier than he let them be aware of. Both of them glanced at him and the bucket of paint he carried.

"Nagakura-sanâ€¦" Saito said slowly, but it didn't stop Shinpachi as he walked over to a large military boat and slid the paintbrush along to scratch out the name and write his own on the side.

"What? They're the ones that shot you I'd say they owe us a boat." He shot back. "Well? What are you two waiting for? You want to die?"

* * *

><p>Once they were settled Chizuru had forced Saito to lie down and allow her to treat his injuries. "Saito-san may I touch you?" She requested, trying to still be polite with him, although she could tell he really didn't want to be treated at all.<p>

She reached forward and unbuttoned his jacket to get it out of the way so that it couldn't hinder her taking care of his injuries. A clearer view startled her; he'd been shot as well, but what she noticed that he had tucked into his jacket startled her even more. He had kept itâ€¦ their banner, though stained with blood and burned in certain places, had been rolled up and tucked into his jacket to be kept safe. She set it aside very gently and folded his jacket to put away as well.

Luck seemed like it was really on his side. On both their sides that they happened to pass through this place at the same time otherwiseâ€¦ who knows what would have happened. She dipped a cloth into the cool water bowl Shinpachi had left with them and cleaned his face gently. Shinpachi had managed to gather enough medical supplies to keep Saito from any serious life-threatening issues.

"Saito-san how did you managed to escape?" She asked, trailing the rag own his neck but he grabbed her hand and held it still in a response. "Ah! What's wrong did I hurt you? Gomen Saito-san!"

"S-s-shitsurei shimasu." He responded and released her to avert his gaze further. "After the fightâ€¦ half of the men were killed and what remained was captured. We were being led to be executed and so we attempted escape so that we might reorganize with Hijikata-san and continue the fightâ€¦ but perhapsâ€¦ its best that they went not knowing and still fighting for what they believedâ€¦ if they knew Hijikata-san was goneâ€¦"

"But what about you? Now that you knowâ€¦ what will you doâ€¦?"

"Yukimuraâ€¦" He glanced away for a moment. "I said it alreadyâ€¦ I'll protect you for him. That is my final duty to my commander. So pleaseâ€¦ don't argue with meâ€¦ and allow me to achieve my duty until my life extinguishes."

Instead of speaking or saying anymore she went back to cleaning the dirt and blood from his skin so that she could find out where exactly his wounds were and what needed to be taken care of first. She grasped at his vest and he sat up in understanding and removed that as well as his shirt and though there was only a slight grimace for just a second she could clearly see that he was in pain.

"You lost weight. They didn't feed you there?" She asked, but as per usual he was a man of few words and didn't answer her. "I'll definitely make something really good for you to eat; after I finish fixing and binding your wounds."

He nodded in acknowledgement and allowed her to do what was needed, even if it was difficult to stay still and not scold her in pain, but still he was a samurai and a man. He had his pride. A real man didn't complain about small injuries like these.

She lightly pressed her fingers against the gruesome wound in his shoulder and felt that hard lump still beneath his skin to indicate that the bullet was still there and if she was to keep him from infection she would have to remove it and even though he didn't complain or say a word about it, she knew that he was in pain from the look on his face.

"Saito-sanâ€¦"

"I know. Just do as you need." He told her and watched her hesitate for just a moment before reached over to the case which held medical tools that Shinpachi had gotten for them and he took a calming breath as he felt the cold metal of the surgical tool invading the burning and aching wound. Upon feeling the click of metal against lead she

frowned, even if he wasn't complaining it had to hurt. It did make it a bit worse since he was focusing on her.

"Stop looking at me like that!" She requested uneasily and pulled a little too roughly to get the bullet out and noticed the grit of his teeth. Along with the bullet his blood spilled down like a river from a sudden rain and she quickly grabbed some bandages to try and soak up the blood and stop its sudden flow. She quickly cleaned it, bandaged it and hastily rushed out her apology. "I'm sorry" Saito-san!"

"Yukimura, you're acting strangely." With his dominate side being the shoulder that was currently disabled he set his right hand on her knee very lightly. He could tell that she was having a hard time" even if he swore on the Shinsengumi name he would not die" he hadn't sworn he'd come back to her" maybe it was better that he walked away once he was healed enough so that he didn't bring her the pain of memories of the old days. "I wasn't aware you were here, I never intended to place such a heavy burden upon you."

"No! That isn't-" Before she could finish what she was saying she felt him press the banner into her hands.

"Take it."

"It doesn't belong to me!" She tried to give it back to him, but he was unrelenting and wouldn't take it back.

"You were always a part of the Shinsengumi, Yukimura. Tending to our wounds and taking care of many chores and meals for us" you did the most important thing. You made it a warm home. That is something I will always be grateful to you for. It belongs to you just as much as it belongs to me, so please take care of it." He pushed it further into her hands. "I want you to have it."

It took a few moments of silence before she accepted the banner and held it close to her chest as if it were the most precious thing to her. She glanced at him, feeling as though she wanted to hug him in thanks but that kind of affection with him didn't seem right, especially with his lack of clothes, even though she'd tended to the wounds of the soldiers before, touching Saito's bare skin of all people felt like it was something off limits and forbidden because Saito wasn't just one of the soldiers; Saito was Saito and Saito Hajime and he was off limits.

"I wish that I knew how to thank you properly, Saito-san."

"You have no need to." He replied and glanced down to his left at his shoulder, he hoped that he would heal fast, because the thought of not being able to wield a sword was a disturbing one.

"You should rest." She said right away and he nodded and adjusted himself to lie down. "Here." She helped him by pulling the blankets up around him comfortably. "Make sure to rest and don't get up, just call if you need anything."

Those really weren't words he wanted to hear and in fact he didn't want to rest at all, he was a hypocrite he knew since he would have told anyone else to rest and heal. But right now even though he wanted to get up and do something they were on a ship at sea and so

he really had nowhere to go. He allowed himself to fall asleep, even though part of him hated himself for it. It made it feel like he was weak, but what could he do on this ship? There was nothing.

Chizuru let out a quiet breath and took his shirt, vest and coat so that she could clean it for him so he would have something clean to wear when he woke. She wouldn't admit that she was a little worried since he had a fever, but she didn't tell him so that it wouldn't worry him.

* * *

><p>"Hajime-kun! Wake up!" Shinpachi leaned over Saito with a grin and Saito simply offered him an irritated glare in response. "We have arrivedâ€|! Hurry up and get up we gotta ditch this thing at the bottom of the water and head off so we don't get caught."<p>

"Where are weâ€|?"

"Close to Tonami."

"Tonami?" Saito sat up abruptly upon hearing those words, but the sudden motion really jarred his wounds and Chizuru grabbed Shinpachi's arm to make him be quiet.

"You promised you would let me say it!" Chizuru complained and Shinpachi smiled nervously and rubbed the back of his neck with an 'oops'. "Youâ€| were sickâ€| with a bad fever and you sleptâ€| for a whileâ€| we both decided it would be better if we just left you to get all the rest that you needed. We're sorry Saito-san!" Both Shinpachi and Chizuru offered a short bow to show how sincere they were in their apology since they were worried he might be angry.

"How long?"

"Look I need to get things ready to sink this thing. Get your things together." Shinpachi left the two of them there alone without another word and Chizuru froze and looked around before she quickly grabbed his folded uniform and handed it to him.

"Look I sewed your uniform so it's good as new!" She told him and he looked from her to the door in worry, looking a little pale that they weren't telling him how long he'd been asleep.

"Chizuruâ€|" He caught himself with a sudden hitch of breath and she glanced up at him suddenly in shock, but he couldn't meet her eyes so he looked away from her. "Yukimura." He corrected himself, but still he had let himself slip which was strange. "I apologizeâ€| forgive me. It must be the fever."

"It's alright. Do youâ€| need any help dressingâ€|?" She asked uneasily, but he shook his head and took his uniform from her.

* * *

><p>They took what they needed from that boat and sunk it to cover their tracks, from here they were far enough away that there shouldn't be any worries.<p>

"Come on; come on, just this way." Shinpachi said and led them to a calm little inn where they could stay and rest. "He should be here. We agreed we'd meet up here."

Saito remained his usual silent self, seemingly unhappy that he had slept for so long or maybe that he had gotten sick in general. Chizuru really wished he wouldn't be so hard on himself, but she and Shinpachi had gotten him a nice gift that would hopefully make him feel better. But now wasn't the time to give it to him.

They were greeted and taken inside and Shinpachi conversed with a pretty woman, a little flirting and they were then taken to a room as if they were royalty.

"Shinpachi-sama€| if there is anything else you need just tell me." The woman giggled and Shinpachi had one of the widest grins Chizuru had ever seen in response. "But your friends€| you'll need two extra rooms?"

Shinpachi made a face and set a hand on his hip. "Ah, no, haha. This is my brother Goro and his wife Yaso."

"Shinpachi€|" Saito reached a hand to his belt, but then realized he didn't have his sword to threaten Shinpachi for such a lie and that even if he did that would get them in trouble as swords weren't being used anymore. Chizuru paled at those words, wondering how he could just say something like that so easily.

"Forgive him! They're newlywed so my brother is just so embarrassed. Hahah!"

"Oh, I see. Well please come this way. I'll make sure they have a room with a good view for their honeymoon then." The woman giggled behind her hand, flirting with her eyes with Shinpachi. He smiled again, but was pulled back by Saito.

"Why did you say that?" He asked quietly.

"You want me to say you're the famous Saito Hajime?" Shinpachi asked and then Saito glanced down. "I also can't afford that many rooms. So€|" Once they arrived at the room Shinpachi threw the door open and set his hands on his hips. "Sanosuke!" He shouted with a grin and Saito and Chizuru looked up in shock to see their old friend alive and well.

"Shinpachi€| you're late again. I had to deal with all the pretty ladies all alone€| not that I minded of course." Harada grinned and took a sip from his sake. "Saito and Chizuru? I didn't think I'd ever see you two again€| and off with this guy too! Come on and sit down. It's better to eat together remember?"

There was a slight bit of uneasy but they all settled down in each other's company, it slightly€| very slightly felt like old times, but the missing presence of certain people was now much more perceptible than it had been formerly. She wondered if Saito felt antipathy towards Shinpachi and Harada for abandoning the Shinsengumi since he was more silent than she remembered him to be or maybe he just still wasn't feeling well. The one thing that did worry her was how much he had drunk already and he was still drinking. Of course Saito liked his sake she knew that, but this€| this was over the

limits even for him.

Somehow Shinpachi and Harada didn't notice, instead they were laughing quietly and drinking as well. It made her sigh quietly; really they were a bunch of big kids. Did men ever mature fully or was it only girls that matured fully? Wellâ€¦ perhaps the exception would have been Hijikata and Saito. They seemed to be very mature men. Still the light hearted childishness of Shinpachi and Harada was also a much needed relief from the seriousness of life.

Harada dropped back onto his back and laid there silently for a while before Shinpachi leaned over him and declared him asleep, also declaring he was going to talk to the inn keeper's daughter some more which made her hope he behaved and didn't get them kicked out. Saito poured another drink Chizuru quickly grabbed his hands, spilling a little of the drink on the floor.

"Yukimuraâ€¦"

"You've had enough. You'll make yourself sick so stop, please." She took the cup away from him and only looked back quickly when she felt the warmth of his breath on her neck indicating he'd moved closer to her. Too close for comfort.

"Chizuruâ€¦" His eyes were only half open and he tilted his head to the side just slightly and she grabbed his jacket hard enough that her fingers turned white under the pressure. It made her want to run away to be this close. It scared her.

"Saito-sanâ€¦" Chizuru said softly trying to hold him where he was so he wouldn't get closer. This was the second time he'd referred to her in that tone of voice. "Saito-san, please rest." She brought one hand up to settle over his cheek. "Your fever is getting high again so you have to rest of you'll get sick."

Without a word he obeyed her command, but she was still left wondering just what was going on with him and why he was acting so strangely. The fever must really have been making him go out of his mind for him to act as bizarrely as he was. She would have attributed it to the alcohol but he had been the same earlier. Maybe the alcohol was making it worse, butâ€¦ she still remembered their time together and could recall one time when he had acted strangely. Tomorrowâ€¦ tomorrow she would ask him what was on his mind.

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><p>The next morning Chizuru woke with a start from a nightmare of the events that had led up to now and her previous traveling alone. At first she believed herself to be completely alone until she looked over to find Shinpachi and Harada passed out on their futons. Saito'sâ€¦ it was empty and he was sitting with the open door and the golden light of the early morning wrapping around his form. In a way it reminded her of a cat sunbathing the way he had his eyes closed as if he were asleep.<p>

How rare to see him like thatâ€¦ he even seemed to have loosened up a little bit as he'd abandon his jacket and rolled his sleeves up to take in as much of the sun as he could. She watched him in silence and even moved closer to him. It didn't seem like he took any notice, but somehow she knew that he was fully aware of his surroundings. She

didn't want to speak and disturb him though; the sun would be good for him.

"Yukimura" do you require something?"

"Ah" no" She answered quietly and moved closer since he had acknowledged her presence. "How are you feeling?"

"This is the first time I have freely sat in the sun in a long time"

"What was it like being in the prisoner camp?"

He inhaled slowly and his eyes opened halfway. "I didn't like being caged."

At those words she looked down with a frown. He had been left alone the last living member of the Shinsengumi abandoned by his comrades to rot in a prisoner camp. They should have done something, she should have done something. She felt so useless she didn't want to be useless anymore.

"Saito-san!" She moved even closer and grasped his forearm which had been placed over his raised knee, lightly, causing him to fully open his eyes in surprise at her actions. "Please, teach me how to fight."

"Teach you to wield a blade like a samurai? Why? Swords are useless now." His words, though they were solemn indicated his disappointment and melancholy.

"Please?" Her grip tightened on his arm and his fingers lightly grasped at the dark fabric of his pants in response, needing something to anchor him to the real world and not be lost and distracted by her touch.

"Very well" if you truly want to learn a useless skill."

"Thank you, Saito-san!" Her hands left his arm and moved to his face as she took his face lightly and pressed a kiss to his cheek in thanks, startling the normally stoic man and drawing a faint red from his cheeks. Once she pulled away he brushed the spot very lightly in deep thought. "S-sorry Saito-san it's just I I'm just overexcited since this morning I thought seeing you again was a dream and"

"I know. You talk in your sleep." Saito stated, looking away calmly.

"E-Eh?!" She was horrified wondering what she possibly could have said or given away in detail in her sleep for Saito to hear. "What sort of things did I say?"

"Do you really wish to know that?" He glanced at her and she averted her eyes.

"N-n-no not really." Chizuru admitted and when Saito looked away she could safely look back at his face to investigate and see what sort of expression he wore. The sunrise reflected in his eyes as distantly as any emotions may be.

"I miss him as well." Without looking at her he spoke and she understood she must have been talking about that person in her sleep. How hard must it have been on Saito to lose his mentor and the person that he looked up to? He had never admitted it, but she had known him long enough and understood that he admired Hijikata. "Did he ever admit to you that he liked you before he died?"

"Ahâ€|" She gasped quietly and stared at Saito seriously. "How did you know something like that, Saito-san?"

"I saw it in his eyes. That was he looked at you and how you made him smile." He replied, making her look away from him yet again in deep thought. Had everyone known it then or was it only Saito that knew something like that? "Do you feel like practicing right now?"

"Now?" She asked him in confusion, but he only nodded at her question so she decided that she may as well agree. "Alright."

"You need to start simply. Practice an easy swing as many times as you can before your arms grow tired and can no longer take it." Saito answered and closed his eyes, still relaxing in the warmth of the early morning sun.

She stepped out to practice with her weapon, determined to go about practicing as long as she could possibly handle it even if she had to really push herself at it. She set up a good exercise of keeping herself in perfect rhythm of swing, rinse, and repeat and she kept at it for a while before she suddenly felt a presence behind her.

"Straighten your back." Saito said quietly, hands taking hers and shifting her grip on her weapon just a little bit. She stiffened completely, if he wanted her back straight it certainly was now. "Relax."

_How am I expected to relax when I can feel you so close to me? _That was what she wanted to say but she didn't. Warmth, she could feel all of his warmth and that of the warmth of the sun he'd spent so long bathing in radiating off of him. It seemed he had realized how uncomfortable he had just made her just now. She felt him release her and step away, but she couldn't turn around and face him with how hard her heart was pounding and how warm her face had gotten. She was sure she was blushing. Why? It was only Saito. He was only teaching her.

"Thank you, Saito-san." She said softly, but he didn't reply, it seemed he disappeared to go back to his sunbathing and let her practice in peace. At this point she was really wondering just what was happening between them. It had to be all the stress built up along with the pain of losing everyone; they just needed something to hold onto. That's what she told herself. That's all it was. It was nothing more than that at all.

She continued to practice long into the late evening.

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><p>The small band of ex-Shinsengumi had been together for some time now, a few weeks, but they were adjusting slowly to life. They had

moved and continued on, eventually meeting with Kurasawa an Aizu retainer. They split and Saito stayed with that man for a long time and Chizuru chose to stay with him for the most part, Shinpachi and Harada moved on and told them they would be in Tokyo if Saito ever changed his mind. What made them remain was Saito's sense of duty and his desire to be needed.<p>

Life here was full of hardship, food was very scarce and they all were doing their best and trying their hardest to provide. It was so bad that the government was often forced to send relief money. Chizuru wondered if it was hard on the leaders of the village having to accept that money as it made it seem they couldn't provide for their own people. Despite how hard it was the women that Chizuru worked with in the fields seemed positive for the most part.

"Ahhâ€| there he isâ€| so cuteâ€|" One of the women Anzu giggled when they saw Saito with some of the other men discussing plans for a new storage building.

"Shinoda-sanâ€|" Another woman Kumi began and looked at Chizuru. Ah! That name that Shinpachi had given to her to keep her true identity hidden. Shinoda Yaso. "You traveled here with Saito-sanâ€| what kind of a man is he?"

"Saito-sanâ€| he'sâ€|" Chizuru paused and set a hand on her chin in thought of how describe Saito and then once she figured out how to put it into words smiled. "Saito-san is like an ox." The women all gasped, having stopped working just to hear this, though they seemed shocked that the girl would call Saito an ox. So she explained further. "He's reliable, steady and trustworthy. He may be introverted, but when an opportunity is presented he can become quite a dignified and eloquent speaker. He always faces danger fearlessly, and betrays no fear in the face of threats. He will never disappoint you and will be loyal to you all his life. An ox. That's Saito-san's personality."

"Shinoda-san it sounds like you're quite fond of him." The eldest of the women Masago mused thoughtfully.

"That's trueâ€| we're good friends." Chizuru admitted.

"Only good friends?" Kumi asked in disbelief.

"With a handsome man like him how could you stand it?" Anzu asked with another quiet giggle and Chizuru simply smiled and shook her head, reaching to go back to work when suddenlyâ€| her hand slippedâ€| and she cut herself quite badly on the spade she had been working with.

"Oh! Shinoda-san!" Masago quickly made her way over to survey the damage done because none of them could afford to be sick or injured in these times.

"It's nothing really I promise!" Chizuru said quickly, but despite her words Masago took her hand and wiped at the spot with a clothâ€| only to findâ€| no injury. Masago in shock let her grip slacken and Chizuru was able to pull away from her. "It's nothing." Chizuru was about to go back to work when she heard a voice call to her.

"Yaso." Saito said as he came closer and grabbed her sleeve to

investigate himself. "Come. I'll take you back to clean up." She nodded and obeyed, allowing the spade to fall and went with Saito as he pulled her along with him, leaving the dumbfounded Masago to stare at the blood on the cloth.

"Saito-san, why did you come to get me?" She asked

"I was told to remind you it was your turn to cook." He replied and she understood right away. Of course she had forgotten, but he came at just the right time. She didn't know how she would answer what happened. Those girls only thought her father died of illness and her brother was killed, not that she and her family were oni. "I'll help you. You worked hard today."

She stared at his back in surprise as he said those words, but to have his company would be nice since he was often away doing his duties and they couldn't spend much time together at all. "Hm! oh! Saito-san! That school you're helping Kurasawa-san with! there's a girl! she's really good with calligraphy and I think she'd be a really great addition."

"Send her then." Saito said as they arrived back at the house and he opened the door and entered the kitchen. There wasn't much and making meals was hard, but somehow they still managed to survive day to day. Illness and malnutrition were still too common though.

Saito rolled his sleeves back and started to set things up, the dull thunk of the knife against the wood in a steady rhythm as he cut vegetables. She watched him silently for a few moments; just fascinated by the way he worked. Calm, steady and to the point! loyal! hard working! Saito was an ox in the best sense of the way. She folded her hands in front of herself and smiled at him even though his back was to her. He really was an amazing man.

His hands stopped and settled against the board as he glanced over his shoulder at her upon noticing her silent stasis. "Is something the matter, Yukimura?"

"Huh? Oh! No I was just thinking, sorry." She apologized quickly, but she watched his shoulders rise in a shrug. It seemed he didn't really mind her getting sidetracked. Then again he was used to cooking with the others and they probably got sidetracked a lot. She made her way to the counter and reached up for the flour so that they could make some tofu cakes, Saito's favorite.

Her hands slipped and the basket of flour came tumbling down and as she ducked and braced for impact she heard a hard thunk and winced, before slowly raising her head and looking at a completely stunned Saito covered in the white powder.

"Yukimura!" White flour covered hair fell into his eyes and he closed them.

"I'm so sorry! Did it hurt badly?!" She asked him, reaching up and dusting his hair to try and get what she could off of him. "I'm really sorry!"

"It's fine." Saito took her wrists lightly and pushed her hand away. "But what isn't fine is that only one of us is all messy!"

"S-Saito-sanâ€¦ be reasonable!" But for this one rare time his face held something that resembled playfulness and she grabbed a handful of flour from the counter and threw it at him just as he grabbed the basket of flour and splashed the remaining powder at the bottom of the basket at her as if one were splashing a bucket of water onto another. "No!" Despite her words she was giggling behind her hand as she threw another handful of flour at him and he sputtered once it hit him.

Even Saito offered a quiet rumble of laughter deep in his chest as they battled and turned the kitchen white as if a blizzard had hit it in the harshest of winters. The battle of the flour basket lasted approximately twenty minutes before both parties surrendered and remained exhausted sitting on the floor against the counter.

"Ah, what a mess." Saito commented quietly.

"You started." Chizuru said leaning her head against the counter door with weariness.

"I know." He replied doing the same and looking up at the ceiling above them. She looked over at him and watched as he brought one leg up and rested his arm over his knee. To see him that casual was unusual.

"But it was nice seeing you smiling and having fun for once."

"Was I?"

"Yeah." She smiled at him and he watched her silently for a moment before giving a small smile back and then closing his eyes. "We better finish dinner."

"Just one moment longer like thisâ€¦"

"Alright." She dusted some flour from his hair. "Just a moment longer."

* * *

><p>It was late night when Saito was having a meeting with Kurasawa who had requested his presence there. Oh, he knew exactly what Kurasawa wished to see him for. There was no other explanation. He had come right away despite how late it had been. There was no saying no. He had to work things out.<p>

"That woman that you're withâ€¦" Kurasawa began and Saito looked up at him seriously, but face giving away nothing. "There was an incident earlierâ€¦ she was with the other women gathering in the fields when she cut herselfâ€¦ there was blood everywhere, yet somehow not a cut on herâ€¦ and it wasn't one of the other women either."

"It must have been a mistake." Saito answered him, taking a sip of sake. He wasn't lying; it was a mistaken, just not in the context that Kurasawa wanted to hear.

"That womanâ€¦ if you took her as your wifeâ€¦ with that strong oni blood of hersâ€¦ your children would be fierce warriorsâ€¦" Kurasawa

smiled at Saito's raised brow and passive face. "I'll sponsor it. Marry herâ€| and with the seed of a warrior and garden of an oni we could cultivate the most powerful warriors the world has ever seen."

Saito didn't give an answer and instead stared at the man with an unamused catlike glare. That thought of just using Chizuru like that was something that disturbed him greatly. He couldn't do it no matter what this man said.

"I understandâ€| you need some time to decideâ€| if you decided against itâ€| I really hopeâ€| that the authorities never find out that you're Yamaguchi Hajime the man that killed that vassal. You were only eighteen at the timeâ€| what drove you to do it after all? Then changing your name and running the join the Shinsengumi. It could be considered worthy of seppuku. Hm. Wellâ€| just decideâ€| come to me with your decision tomorrow?"

"Yes." Saito replied calmly and stood, offered a bow to the man and then walked out.

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><p>TBC...<p>

A/N Oh Saito... what will you do...?

End
file.